

Facts Misinterpreted

Intelligence Called Faulty In Viet Prison Camp Raid

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH
Reporters News Service

Washington, Jan. 28—The White House relied on basic military intelligence that was at least six months old in approving the unsuccessful commando raid last November on the Son Tay prisoner of war camp inside North Vietnam.

Interviews over the past two months revealed that the Pentagon's first information about the Son Tay camp—23 miles west of Hanoi—was supplied by a former North Vietnamese prison guard who was either captured or defected during the U.S.-South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in May, 1970.

The guard, whose capture was considered highly classified information, provided military intelligence teams with invaluable information about the location, operation and construction of the Son Tay prison. The detailed information even included what kind of locks were on the cell doors, and where they were located.

By July, the interrogation of the prison guard had been completed, and the Air Force was ordered to initiate a series of overflights of the Son Tay prison. However, at no time before the actual invasion of the prison—on November 20, six months after the guard's capture—was the military able to establish any further proof that Americans were, in fact, being detained inside Son Tay.

In essence, the high-risk operation was staged—with approval from President Nixon—although the only known facts were those supplied by the former prison camp guard.

Yet, there was no available evidence indicating that the military planners "knew" that the Son Tay camp did not contain prisoners, as Sen. J. W. Fulbright (D., Ark.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has publicly charged.

What does emerge from an intensive investigation of the Son Tay raid sheds light on the practices and operation of the

Defense Intelligence Agency which was in charge of intelligence for the mission.

The photo analysts somehow interpreted what turned out to be a vegetable garden growing inside the Son Tay compound as evidence that many American prisoners were inside the area.

Here is the story of the planning behind the Son Tay operation:

The capture—or defection—of the North Vietnamese prison camp guard in May, 1970, was a major achievement; such men were never sent by Hanoi into South Vietnam because of the higher risk of capture. At least three POW camps previously were known to exist inside the city limits of Hanoi, but the location of other facilities was not known. Despite this, the military had long been seeking permission to raid one of the known camps.

One clue to the adequacy of the overall American intelligence operation inside North Vietnam emerged from the simple fact that the Pentagon learned about the Son Tay camp from the captured guard, the Son Tay area had, in fact, long been known to the intelligence community and was frequently photographed.

According to defense sources, a major military construction program, manned by a force estimated at 15,000 Chinese Communists, got under way there in 1955 or 1956. The area also became the site of a MIG base early in the Air War and was a key target area during the heavy bombings from 1965 through November, 1963.

The Central Intelligence Agency also had been unable to develop any solid information about prisoner of war camps. Beginning in the mid-1950's, it had attempted unsuccessfully to infiltrate highly trained teams of South Vietnamese into North Vietnam.

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parachute in the Red River Delta, northwest of Hanoi, but quickly became, as a former agent said, "grounded up like hamburger. They'd get wrapped up in two or three days," he added, largely due to the high state of internal security in the North.

In July, 1970, the military asked the Central Intelligence Agency for any information it had on the physical makeup of Son Tay, but that, apparently, was the extent of the CIA's involvement.

The raid on Son Tay was to be an all-military affair, with overall direction and planning coming from the Pentagon's counterinsurgency office and intelligence coming from photo interpretation supplied by DIA.

The early reconnaissance photographs of the prison camp indicated that it was still in heavy use and were highly encouraging to the men in the Pentagon. A highly skilled team was carefully assembled; men were hand-picked from offices throughout the Pentagon and assigned to the secret operation. The planning was rigidly compartmentalized for security reasons; one group of men worked on means for getting the rescue team safely in and out of North Vietnam; another group did the day-by-day analysis to determine a crucial fact—were the pilots there?

The evidence that the photo interpreters viewed as encouraging, however, was far from definite proof that the captured pilots were at Son Tay.

One man who worked on the Son Tay project, attempting to explain its failure, argued that photo reconnaissance is not an exact science at all, despite the wide-spread beliefs of the general public so conditioned to descriptions of miraculous close-ups from "eye in the sky" cameras 100 miles up. The source added:

"Take that photograph of the crowd on the eclipse during the March on Washington (the anti-war demonstration in November, 1969)—it was an Air Force picture published in a lot of newspapers. Now, don't ask anybody to break down how many of the people were Negroes and how many were Caucasian. We just can't do it. But after they left, you sure could tell the grass would be all trampled."

A similarly trampled appearance was evident in what seemed to be a grassy area inside the tiny Son Tay compound. The aerial photographs also established that the guard towers and basic layout of Son Tay were very similar in design to that of the camps inside Hanoi. It was agreed—without ever seeing an identifiable prisoner—that the Son Tay facility was an active POW camp for Americans.

Sometime in the July-August period, the military got a shock when, during a period of heavy flooding of the Red River Delta, the camp was suddenly vacated. The changing geography of the camp was apparent; the trampled look disappeared.

When the flood waters receded, the geography changed again—much to everybody's relief—and the courtyard suddenly took on "that well-worn look," as one analyst described it. By now it was August and the White House was approached.

Briefings were presented to President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the President's adviser on national security affairs. The President was, according to later White House accounts, "enthusiastic" about the idea and authorized full-scale planning and training for a search and rescue mission.

The cloak-and-dagger operation was code-named the Joint Contingency Task Group Ivory Coast, and training began in August at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Optimism was rising inside the government; it was the first time that the military had established an intelligence "hook" on a POW camp that was not inside the Hanoi city limits.

But there were many basic intelligence problems that were never overcome. For one thing, no one had established beyond a reasonable doubt that the Son Tay prison was holding Americans. "We had a hypothesis based on various sources of information," said one analyst who worked on the project, "but as far as being able to say, 'Hey, there go two more guys into the camp'—well, we couldn't." The official added:

"Our situation was this: So a river comes out and floods—and so they (the North Vietnamese) move the pilots out. The place overflows. It looks bad. Bingo. The grass starts to wear down again. Hey, it looks good. It's a

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POW Site Raid Based On Data Six Months Old

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH

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Interviews over the last two months disclosed that the Pentagon's first information about the Son Tay camp—23 miles west of Hanoi—was supplied by a former North Vietnamese prison guard who either was captured or defected after the United States and South Vietnam invaded Cambodia in May 1970.

The guard, whose capture was considered highly classified information, provided military intelligence teams with invaluable information about location, the operation and construction of the Son Tay prison. The detailed information included even what kind of locks were on the cell doors and where the cells were.

By July, the interrogation of the prison guard had been completed and the Air Force was ordered to initiate a series of aerial overflights over the Son Tay prison. At no time before the actual invasion of the prison — on Nov. 20, six months after the guard's capture — was the military able to establish any further proof that Americans were, in fact, being detained inside Son Tay. In essence, the high-risk operation was staged — with approval from President Richard M. Nixon — although the only known facts were those supplied by the former prison camp guard.

YET, THERE was no available evidence indicating that the military planners "knew" that the Son Tay camp did not contain prisoners, as Senator J. William Fulbright (Dem.), Arkansas, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has charged publicly.

The Defense Intelligence Agency was in charge of intelligence for the mission. The agency's photo analysts interpreted what turned out to be a vegetable garden growing inside the Son Tay compound as evidence that many American prisoners were inside the area.

Here is the story of the planning behind the Son Tay operation:

The capture — or defection — of the North Vietnamese prison guard in May 1970 was a major achievement. Such men were never sent by Hanoi into South Vietnam because of the higher risk of

capture. At least three POW camps previously were known to exist inside the city limits of Hanoi, but the location of other facilities was not known. Despite this, the military long had been seeking permission to raid one of the known camps.

One clue to the quality of the over-all American intelligence operation inside North Vietnam emerged from the simple fact that the Pentagon learned about the Son Tay camp from the captured guard. The Son Tay area had long been known to the intelligence community and frequently was photographed.

ACCORDING to defense sources, a major military construction program, manned by a force estimated at 15,000 Chinese Communists, got under way there in 1965 or 1966. The area also became the site of a MIG base early in the air war and was a key target area during the heavy bombings from 1965 through November 1968.

The Central Intelligence Agency also had been unable to develop any solid information about prisoner of war camps. Beginning in the mid-1960s, it had attempted unsuccessfully to infiltrate highly trained teams of South Vietnamese into North Vietnam. Most of the groups — known in the intelligence community as "bell teams" — were dropped by parachute in the Red River delta, northwest of Hanoi, but quickly became, as a former agent said, "ground up like hamburger. They'd get wrapped up in two or three days," he continued, largely due to the high state of internal security in the north.

IN JULY 1970 the military asked the Central Intelligence Agency for any information that might lead to a POW camp in Son Tay, but that apparently was the extent of the CIA's involvement. The raid on

Son Tay was to be an all-military affair, with over-all direction and planning coming from the Pentagon's counterinsurgency office, and intelligence coming from photo interpretation supplied by the Defense Intelligence Agency.

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